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ABSTRACT

This article presents two developmental studies of discourse patterns in student writing. Results from two projects are presented: (1) the NORDWRITE project (1986-1989; Norwegian argumentative material from grades eight and nine) and (2) a comparison of argumentative writing in grades eight and nine with foreign language argumentative writing at the same grade levels. Within a hierarchical discourse framework, it is argued that the theory of grounding may be used to develop functional interpretations of formal developments. The two studies suggest that the essential writing development at secondary educational levels may be characterized by emerging discourse structures at low superstructural levels. Findings also suggest that patterns of development are similar in first- and foreign-language writing. (Author/JP)

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A sense of relief: Backgrounding in argumentative student writing

LARS SIGFRED EVENSEN

Abstract

This article presents two developmental studies of discourse patterns in student writing. Within a hierarchical discourse framework it is argued that the theory of grounding may be used to develop functional interpretations of formal developments.

The two studies suggest that the essential writing development at secondary educational levels (year 8 and above) may be characterized by emerging discourse structures at low superstructural levels. The function of these structures is to offer background information essential to e.g. interpreting the relevance of the argumentation.

The studies also suggest that patterns of development are similar in first-language and foreign-language writing.

1. Acquisition of written discourse

The applied study of developing student writing raises a number of research problems:

- How does the discourse level develop in student writing? Are there particularly central dimensions of development?

- What potential and which problems are students facing in writing at different educational levels?

In approaching these issues I shall adopt a hierarchical perspective on discourse, where coherence is viewed as the outcome of interaction between several types of phenomena. Grimes's (1975) classical 'thread of discourse' should hence be conceived rather as a 'braid of discourse'. In Figure 1 below, Agar & Hobbs's (1982) hierarchical coherence model is mapped on to a figure from classical Norwegian literature.

Figure 1. *A discourse model of Synnøve Solbakken.*

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In this model, discourse coherence is conceptualized as the simultaneous occurrence of referential (themal) coherence, local coherence (resulting from functional and semantic relations between adjacent utterances) and global coherence (resulting from functional relations between larger discourse units). The distinction between themal and global coherence is closely related to van Dijk's 1980 distinction between the macrostructure and the superstructure of a text. Following van Dijk 1982, I shall assume that the superstructure of a text contains meso-level structures between the top-level and the bottom-level. The rest of the article will focus on this particular aspect of coherence.

I shall adopt grounding theory (Hopper, 1979; Hopper & Thompson, 1980; Weber 1983; Chvany, 1985) as a way of linking form to function. Grounding theory applies principles from gestalt psychology to discourse processing. Ilstad (1982:34) states that "in every stimulus field there is some part (figure) that in some way distinctly stands out from the rest (ground)" (my translation, LSE). In this approach, meaning is in a fundamental sense a relational concept, a relation which will be referred to in this article as 'relief'.

Applications of gestalt principles to narrative analysis have shown that the narrative sequence of actions/events forms the figure, or the foreground of the narrative (Reinhart, 1984). If, however, there is no clue in the discourse or in the context to the function or relevance of the narrative sequence, the reader will be left with a "So what?" reaction. A narrative worth telling thus also contains or implies background material of a descriptive, explanatory or evaluative nature, which brings the event sequence into *relief* in relation to e.g. actors' motives, goals or any contextual implications of the events narrated (cf. Labov and Waletzky, 1967; Labov, 1972 on evaluation in narrative discourse). These backgrounded parts of the discourse are signalled by a number of linguistic phenomena, many related to tense-aspect patterns (Fleischman, 1985). Particularly foregrounded parts may also occur, as when dramatic parts of the story are signalled by a temporary shift to 'historical' present tense (Schiffrin, 1981).

Most of the early studies of grounding used narrative discourse as their starting point (see e.g. Hopper, 1979; Schiffrin, 1981, Fleischman, 1985; Chvany, 1985 and references in Weber, 1983). Recently, other types of discourse have been included as well. Thus Ingegerd Bäcklund (1988) has presented a stimulating study of grounding in expository writing. In this paper I shall adopt a grounding approach to argumentation.

In doing so I shall assume that both of the argumentative categories that Stephen Toulmin (1958) refers to as 'claim' (or the writer's position) and 'data' (the arguments) conventionally function as foreground. The relation between position and arguments

is pointed out by van Eemeren, Grootendorst and Kruiger (1987) as a basic dimension common to all major theories of argumentation. 'Warrants' (linking data with mutually known values) and 'backing', on the other hand, I shall assume act as background, having as a major part of their function to place the argumentation within a cultural, evaluative context.

The Toulmin model does not contain a superstructural element. It thus excludes a number of organizational aspects that are very relevant to the discourse analysis of written argumentation, which typically contains larger discourse sections ordered on the basis of cultural conventions and global pragmatic considerations. I shall follow Tirkkonen-Condit (1985) and Connor and Lauer (1987) in assuming that written argumentation often contains an introduction. This part of the discourse is multi-functional, introducing the theme of the discourse, demonstrating the relevance of the issue at hand, creating expectations in the reader and guiding her/him in the reading process. Also, an evaluation may be included as a coda, summarizing major points and suggesting implications of a proposed solution to a specific problem. In the analysis below superstructural categories like introduction, elaboration and coda will all be treated as backgrounded parts of the discourse. At lower levels in the superstructural hierarchy, comments, explanations and illustrations will be viewed as background as well.

Within a relational approach to meaning, backgrounded parts are very important. They are necessary both to establish the relevance of the discourse, to partition it into readable chunks and to optimize information density. Thus, effective backgrounding (establishing relief) is a sign of high quality writing. This aspect of writing quality is one that many student writers acquire very slowly and painfully.

In this paper I am first going to briefly summarize a set of results from a study in foreign language writing, suggesting some answers to the research questions mentioned initially. This summary will then be used as background to a follow-up study reported here, comparing foreign language to first language writing. The second study will thus function as an informal test of the validity of the first one.

The focus will be on two aspects of discourse acquisition. The first is the hypothesis that the lower superstructural level is the developmentally most important *formal* level in narrative and argumentative written competence at secondary levels of education. One substantiation of this hypothesis is the interpretation of some student texts as a series of headings with only embryonic paragraphs "hanging" under them. The hypothesis also captures teacher observations leading to their advice: "Show, don't tell."

The second aspect is the hypothesis that the most important *functional* level of development is related to grounding: more specifically that, as students develop, there

is an increase in backgrounded information bringing foregrounded parts into relief. Also, there is clearer "closure" of paragraph level discourse structures in more advanced student writing, leading to improved readability.

2. Study I: The NORDWRITE Project

The NORDWRITE project (1986-1989) was a joint Nordic investigation into the discourse-level development of student writing in a foreign language. The material consisted of four national corpora, documenting narrative and argumentative writing in English as a foreign language (EFL), at six grade levels, from grade eight in comprehensive school to first year at university or college (cf. NORDWRITE Reports III for an extensive materials description).

The narrative material was based on an assignment with cue words invoking an accident frame (crash - police - ambulance). The argumentative material was based on an assignment asking for the student's preference with regard to living in a town versus living in the country. In each participating class these two assignments were split evenly between the students. The time available for writing was two lessons (80-90 minutes).

In the present paper results from a subset of the Norwegian argumentative material from grades eight and nine are included, firstly to illustrate tendencies in the larger Nordic material and secondly as a basis for comparison with results from a follow-up study. The subset consisted of 26 compositions. Twelve of these (the high skill group) had received high holistic scores from the students' teachers, and fourteen (the medium skill group) had received medium scores.

The analyses in the NORDWRITE study resulted in a fairly large pool of variables discriminating between students writing at different age and skill levels. In the general discussion it was realized that most of the variables in the pool could be interpreteted as being related to grounding. Below I shall exemplify this overall result by describing two variables taken from the Norwegian study. The detailed inventory of final results will be presented in NORDWRITE Reports IV (forthcoming).

One variable studied in the Norwegian argumentative material was patterns of verb sequence across clause and sentence boundaries. These patterns consist of discourse-motivated shifts away from the normal sequence of simple present verb forms (see NORDWRITE Reports II, Evensen, 1990 and, forthcoming a for details). Such shifts occur in argumentative writing when e.g. a narrative section is used to illustrate a point being made (e.g. by placing it in its historical context) or to contrast present reality with a past alternative state of affairs. A shift may also be used for evaluative

purposes, as when present positions are discussed in relation to alternative discourse worlds.

An example from a student text may illustrate the evaluative function of alternating between different discourse worlds. In this excerpt an alternative world section is introduced as a summary, rejecting the alternative point of view.

Figure 2. *Motivated shifts away from a present tense argumentative sequence, in a 9th grade text.*

> In the country.....it's long between the houses and there are very few busses there. When you want to go shopping, you have to go to the nearest town, because there are very few shops in the country.
> I *wouldn't live* in the country because I *would feel* lonely there.
>
> (1507)

It was found that the frequency of such shifts discriminated between student writers from grades 8 and 9 (as it did in the narrative material for a different verb sequence sub-system). Results are presented in Table 1, in conjunction with the results from Study II.

The second variable studied was the relation between local and global discourse markers. Here a global marker (henceforth termed 'pointer ') is defined as a discourse marker governing a discourse structure of three or more minimal discourse-functional units (see Lieber 1980 and Lindeberg 1986 for discussions of clause-equivalent functional units as a tool for discourse analysis; see Evensen, 1990b for a discussion and classification of pointers).

The results for the global use of pointers are presented in Table 2, in comparison with similar data from first language writing.

It was found that more frequent use of pointers correlated with age, such that grade 9 students structured their arguments explicitly at more global levels. It was also found that older students used a greater variety of pointers (to be documented in NORDWRITE Reports IV).

3. Study II: The DEVEL Project

3.1. *Aims and hypotheses*

The study to be reported here was carried out within a new inter-disciplinary Norwegian project which is trying to map development in first language writing from a socio-cultural angle - "Developing written language competence - The DEVEL Project." The specific sub-study reported here is the first part of a larger study within the project, where effects on grounding of different approaches to the teaching of writing are investigated.

The present sub-study compared first language argumentative writing in grades 8 and 9 (lower secondary school) with foreign language argumentative writing at the same grade levels. The student compositions were taken from traditional teaching of writing.

The research was carried out under the hypothesis that development in discourse-level writing ability is very similar in first language and foreign language contexts, and hence that the development of grounding patterns in a first language context should resemble those found in a foreign language context.

The L1= L2 hypothesis is well known from morphological ESL research (e.g. Krashen, 1982). The hypothesis is also consistent with earlier discourse analyses. In analyzing Norwegian as a first language (NL1) Zwicky (1984) found that at both lower and upper secondary levels a discourse measure of lexis - 'follow-up' - (Fløttum, 1981) correlated positively with teacher evaluation. In the Swedish part of the NORDWRITE Project using this measure, similar results have been obtained for foreign language writing (Linnarud, forthcoming).

3.2. Material

The first part of the material consisted of a subsample of the Norwegian NORDWRITE corpus - 26 medium-to-high quality texts from grades 8 and 9. The second part consisted of a subsample drawn from the Trondheim Corpus of Applied Linguistics (Evensen, 1982) - 16 medium-to-high quality texts from grades 8 and 9. The quality ratings in both subsamples were based on holistic teacher judgements.

The low skill group was excluded from the present study because no comparable L1 argumentative data were available from this group in grade 8. This fact is a conspicuous characteristic of a large national corpus of student writing. The corpus here reflects the relative neglect of argumentation in the Norwegian pedagogical tradition (the consultant being the supreme outcome of the educational system). This

neglect of argumentative writing also became apparent when the NORDWRITE group pretested a battery of tentative assignments for its data collection. Many teachers in grades 8 and 9 complained that argumentative assignments would be too difficult for their students. The student material proved them wrong.

Two argumentative topics were chosen from the Trondheim Corpus at at each grade level. In grade 8 these were "Cars - luxury or necessity?" and "Women and athletics". The second of these topics was written in reply to a male chauvinist prompt. In grade 9 the two topics were "My opinion of the Olympic Games" and "Youth and work". The first assignment was given a few months after the Moscow games had been boycotted because of the invasion of Afghanistan - the boycott thus having been recently debated. The second assignment was written in reply to a "letter to the editor" complaining about alleged laziness and lack of responsibility among youngsters.

3.3. Results

The results for verb form sequence are presented in Table 1 below. The results are reported as ratios of motivated shifts per functional unit.

Table. 1. *Motivated shifts in verb sequence per functional unit (N). Ratios for EFL and NL1 argumentative writing. Medium to high skill levels in grades 8 and 9.*

	EFL	NL1
8th grade	(N=291) .07	(N=171) .15
9th grade	(N=625) .09	(N=185) .20

The table also shows that the general frequency of shifts is much larger in the first language material.

The results for the degree of explicitly signalled global organization are presented in Table 2 below. The results are reported as ratios of global pointers per local connector (N).

Table 2. *Global pointer/ local connector ratios in EFL and NL1 argumentative writing. Medium to high skill levels in grades 8 and 9.*

	EFL	NL1
8th grade	(N=139) .28	(N=131) .21
9th grade	(N=247) .33	(N=175) .24

This table shows that, once more, the developmental direction is the same for both sets of texts. Here, however, the ratio of explicit global organization is higher in the EFL material than in the NL1 material.

4. Discussion

Shifts in verb form sequence may sometimes introduce foregrounded material, but for the sake of the argument in this paper I shall assume that most shifts code backgrounded parts of the discourse at a low superstructural level. This function is exemplified in the EFL text excerpt below, where the shift signals the onset of a mini-paragraph evaluating an alternative world.

Figure 3. *A sample low meso-level shift in verb sequence.*

> In the country there *is* a lovely nature.....
> If you *live*(O) in town you *wouldn't have* the possiblety to see this.
> You *wouldn't* even *notice* that the spring *was* there.
>
> In the country it *is* much better air than it is in the towns...
>
> (0610)

In interpreting the results from the pointer study I shall assume that these have a discourse function different from local connectors, in that they help establish the superstructural "contours" of a discourse. They both delimit parts of a "composition" and code the specific function of each part in relation to other parts. These results are consistent with a finding in the Finnish NORDWRITE material, where the positive correlation between low meso-level units (functional paragraphs) and typographical paragraphs increased with increasing skill (Lindeberg, forthcoming).

The issue to be discussed is whether the EFL results seem transferable to a first language context. The material presented so far seems to support this hypothesis. In both sets of data there is a similar developmental tendency in the direction of both more background information and more clustering of text content at a low meso-level. The extent of these differences will be explored in a more qualitatively oriented study of alternative worlds in student argumentation (Evensen, forthcoming b).

5. Conclusions and implications

5.1.Theoretical

The present material suggests that writing development does not seem to go only in the direction toward more global structuring, but also in the direction from global structuring to more structure at the meso-level. Many of these meso-level structures have as their function to offer background information.

This pattern may suggest a link with general language acquisition patterns. Karmiloff-Smith (1984) has suggested such a line of development (i.e. from local to global to meso) in oral child language development. She has also suggested that the frequency of explicit signals peaks at medium levels of development, to be gradually replaced by more diverse and more implicit means of structuring at higher levels. The present material may well allow for such an interpretation. In that case, we are partly studying general language acquisition patterns even when we are studying students learning to write in a foreign language.

5.2.Pedagogical

The findings presented in the present report imply that there is a strong untapped potential in student writing. Fairly advanced linguistic patterns seem to be within reach for some students at fairly low levels of education. Both EFL and NL1 students in grade 8 thus outperform teacher expectations of student ability. Mid-level students are able to produce fairly coherent arguments in a foreign language by the end of grade 8. Still, argumentative writing is extremely rare in Norwegian schools at these levels, in both first- and foreign-language teaching.

Thus, the findings also establish a case for more argumentative writing in schools. Argumentative writing is probably the most important form of writing in out-of-school contexts (Degenhart 1987), and an important prerequisite for active democracy in a modern society.

In an innovative school context, argumentative writing may play a role in developing the process-oriented approach to writing. The potential here lies in extending the relatively narrow text-type repertoire typically found in process-oriented teaching, without losing the new focus on the student writer as an autonomous subject responsible for his/her learning process. When students use their own, genuine opinions and convictions as raw materials for the writing process, they will also need linguistic tools for voicing these opinions. Some of the tools needed are very complex (like verb forms signalling alternative discourse worlds in argumentation or literary writing), but many young writers do develop these tools when needed, even in traditional (non-)teaching contexts.

In a pedagogical evaluation it is also important to be aware of the intuitive appeal present in the notions of foreground and background, when these are presented in less technical terms than has been done here. In writing instruction and evaluation they may thus be successfully introduced in classrooms as terms inviting a more functional approach to meaning, and they may perhaps promote discourse studies by language teachers of both linguistic and literary inclinations.

Notes

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